

Will coronavirus help or hinder women's candidacies?

April 28 2020, by Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant



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Women's leadership has [drawn a lot of praise](#) during the COVID-19 crisis, including for politicians like New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and [chief medical officers](#) Theresa Tam and Bonnie Henry.

There has also been quick acceptance that [women's](#) perspectives must shape the crisis response. [Attention to issues like domestic violence](#), which is increasing during the pandemic, is a good example. Longer term, however, what effect will the crisis have on women's political power? Will the pool of women candidates and leaders swell or contract in coming years?

Women make up only [25 percent of legislators worldwide](#), and only 29 percent in Canada's House of Commons. The chief obstacle for women attaining political office is [recruitment and nomination](#), not [general election](#). Women are less likely than men to seek candidacy, and parties are less likely to recruit and nominate women than men, including to [winnable districts](#).

Political recruitment requires time, money and professional networks. Economic status and social hierarchy affect the decision to run for office.

Women have fewer resources

Women run less often because they have fewer of these resources, and early data on COVID-19's effects suggest those inequities will widen. [Statistics Canada's March jobs report](#), for example, shows that Canadian women suffered greater job losses than men since the pandemic started, and not only in the service industry, but also in the hard-hit insurance, real estate and finance sectors.

Among core workers aged 25 to 54 years, women account for 70 percent of job losses. Government income supports will help compensate, but concern about women's economic well-being and future career trajectories is warranted.

For women who have retained employment, they too face pandemic

pressures. With schools and day-care centres closed, many parents now find themselves engaged heavily in child care and home-schooling, and also care responsibilities for relatives, friends and neighbours. Women shoulder a disproportionate share of all these tasks.

In Canada, the [2015 General Social Survey \(GSS\)](#) shows that women spent 47 percent more time per day on housework than men did (2.8 hours versus men's 1.9 hours), 64 percent more time on routine child-care tasks (2.3 versus 1.4 hours), and 70 percent more time per day on caring for other adults (1.7 versus 1 hour).

Detailed time-use data was not collected in the 2018 General Social Survey, but it is unlikely that these patterns changed dramatically in three years, and certainly not enough to close care gaps.

As the care demands increase during COVID-19, therefore, it's reasonable to assume that women are the essential front line in many households.

Career paths interrupted

Care for home and children can be a rewarding part of life for many men and women. But the danger now is that inequitable care patterns established long before the crisis are likely to have dramatic consequences. These include substantial interruptions in women's career achievement and diminished time and energy for political engagement. This consequently will contribute to even greater gaps in the supply of qualified and eager women candidates post-pandemic.

On the other hand, maybe things will be better for women candidates after the pandemic. Perhaps flexible work arrangements will persist, allowing more women to combine care-taking and career ambitions, including political careers.

Legislatures could become more flexible workplaces, allowing remote sittings and voting, for example, as recommended by the [Good Parliament Report](#), a blueprint for a more representative British parliament by gender and politics professor Sarah Childs.

While complex, such reforms might make politics more attractive to women, especially in large countries like Canada, where many MPs must travel thousands of kilometres between their constituencies and Parliament Hill. Greater workplace flexibility would also allow women MPs to breastfeed longer if they choose, and recover more fully post-birth, while still serving their constituents and fulfilling parliamentary duties.

In the home, the COVID-19 crisis may have put some men into primary caretaker roles if they've been laid off and their partners have not, which may accelerate the erosion of gendered norms about the household division of labour.

More involved fathers post-pandemic?

[Studies of the effects of paternity/parental leave on fathers](#) suggest that caretaking norms and behaviours can shift rapidly. Men who take parental leave are more likely to be involved with the care of their children further down the road.

The effect is found in countries around the world, and is not simply a product of pre-birth childcaring commitment, socioeconomic status and other drivers of involvement —it appears to be an independent effect of men taking parental leave.

Households where men have experienced primary or equitably shared care for a child end up being more equitable environments with greater continued sharing of care later too. The same outcome may prevail as a

result of COVID-19 [child care](#) and home schooling.

Whatever the eventual impact on women's candidacies post-pandemic, COVID-19 has the potential to shock the system, upending or reinforcing existing gender imbalances in political power.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Will coronavirus help or hinder women's candidacies? (2020, April 28) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-coronavirus-hinder-women-candidacies.html>

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